

# THE ALLEGED DISCOVERY OF MERCURY IN MALACCA.

BY

DR. W. BOTT, F.C.S. F.G.C.S., F.P.S., &C.

---



IN November last year, I was informed that a quantity of mercury had been discovered during excavations on St. Paul's Hill, Malacca, on the site of the new water reservoir for the town. The discovery, I believe, produced some little excitement at the time.

and may, in certain quarters, even have conjured up pleasant visions of a new-born revenue of Malacca from a rich mercury mine. Now the existence of such a treasure would doubtless have resulted in a transfer of the proposed reservoir to a new place and the giving up of the venerable hill of St. Paul to the rude attacks of the pick and spade of the miner, and, as the work of excavation was then progressing, and the very spot of the discovery was about to be covered up, it seemed desirable to enquire into the matter without delay. In due course, I received two large bags of the supposed ore—one from the exact place where the mercury had been collected, the other from the immediate vicinity. Both samples consisted of bright red earth, and the colour might or might not have been due to cinnabar (Sulphide of Mercury) as far as mere appearance went. On closer examination, visible globules of metallic mercury were found throughout the whole of the first sample, while the second contained none. Unfortunately the character of the soil in which the mercury was found, did not accord with its occurrence, for further examination shewed that the colour of the soil was entirely due to red, argillaceous ferric hydroxide, and that besides

metallic mercury it contained no combined mercury, no cinnabar, or in fact a sulphide of any kind. Now the presence of mercury in such a matrix of laterite pure and simple is a mineralogical impossibility, and my first attempt to solve the problem was by sharply questioning the Laboratory Steward whether he had lately spilled any mercury about the place. This led to indignant protests and no result, and thus there was left but one possible hope of explanation, viz., the existence of a cinnabar vein in St. Paul's Hill, from which the mercury had been derived, although it seemed strange that none of the cinnabar had found its way into the sample with it. A report was sent to the effect that the mercury was there, that it had no business to be there, and its presence could only be accounted for by a somewhat improbable hypothesis. At the instance of the Acting Resident Councillor, I was then asked to visit the place in person, but was unable to do so until the end of January, when I found a great part of the site covered up with brickwork. No difficulty was, however, experienced in ascertaining the nature of the entire formation, and proving the absence of a cinnabar vein and of sulphides generally. The existence of metallic mercury, however, was confirmed; appreciable quantities of it were found in several places, in fact 2 oz. were collected in about ten minutes. Having proved that this metal could not primarily have been present in the soil, it follows that it must have found its way into it by accident, and this opens up an unlimited field for speculation, unfortunately, however, without the redeeming feature of being able to tell the correct guess from the rest.

As several pounds of the metal had been obtained with little trouble in one place, and more might have been collected in other parts, it is evident, that a considerable quantity of mercury must, at one time or another, have been placed into the ground intentionally or accidentally; this suggests the following possibilities and new questions:—

1. The metal was intentionally poured into the ground. It is hard to conceive a reason for this; "salting" mercury mines would be a new idea entirely.

2. The metal was hidden in the ground. This is possible, and may have been done for an unlimited number of reasons, but then suitable vessels would have been used, and no trace of such has been unearthed.

3. The mercury was spilled by accident. This too is possible; it must have been a pretty big and expensive spill, and the operator does not seem to have tried very hard to pick up the precious fluid.

4. Who buried or spilled the mercury? There is no record of mercury being stored on St. Paul's Hill during recent years; the Dutch or Portuguese may, therefore, have been the guilty party.

5. What was the mercury intended for? Gold-mining?

6. Why was it buried in the ground if we discard the spilling theory?

The above and a legion more questions and conjectures environ the mercurial puzzle of St. Paul's Hill, Malacca. Whether any light will ever be thrown upon the dark problem of the bright metal, whether one of the many contributors of this Journal familiar with side issues and odd details of Malacca history will be able to produce facts bearing upon the matter, remains to be seen. Until then, to Malacca will belong the credit of an inexplicable conjuring trick in the mineral line, unless the reader traces the mercury back to spiritualistic agencies, or concludes, with TOPSY, that it "grewed."

W. BOTT.

---

NOTE.—Since writing the above I have found the possible explanation of the discovery of mercury in St. Paul's Hill. CAMERON in his book "Malayan India," chapter XIII, states, that about 1864 Captain PLAYFAIR discovered at the base of the hill an old cellar or store-room which had formed part of the old Portuguese Government buildings. In it—in a small recess—were found forty or fifty earthenware pots mostly crumbled to pieces, but each of those which were whole contained a small quantity of mercury. Only about four pounds

altogether were collected, but had the pots been full, as they probably were when first stowed away, they must have contained more than a ton of mercury. The metal had been brought there in connection with gold-mining on Mount Ophir. As only a small quantity of the metal was recovered in 1864 and recently, a ton or so of the metal, representing a value of about \$2,000 would still remain buried in St. Paul's Hill. It remains, however, still to be proved that the mercury recently found *is* part of that formerly discovered by PLAYFAIR. The latter distinctly states that the mercury was discovered at the base of the hill, whereas the recent finds were made some distance above the base. It is difficult to conceive that this mercury should have worked its way up the hill, and it is more likely to be traced to another hiding place or store-room made on a higher level.

W. BOTT.

